MEURSAULT OR THE LEAP OF DEATH

*by Jerry L. Curtis**

Critics in recent years have suggested that the hero of Camus' *L'Etranger*[1] does not achieve any cogent awareness of the absurdity of his predicament until the last few pages of the book. Jean-Paul Sartre, for instance, puts forth what seems to me to be a contradictory assertion in his "Explication de *L'Etranger*": He states that Meursault's awareness of absurdity "ne nous paraît pas conquise mais donnée: il est comme ça, voilà tout," yet he speaks elsewhere of the hero's "illumination à la dernière page."[2] Gerald H. Storzer has written that Meursault lives "au niveau des sens jusqu'à ce qu'il s'approche de la révélation de la fin du livre."[3] William M. Manly views *L'Etranger* as Meursault's "journey to consciousness," and states that the hero becomes aware of his absurd condition only in the last pages of the book.[4] Albert B. Smith suggests that when Meursault is confined to his cell and condemned to death, his consciousness awakens as "from a long sleep."[5] The critics mentioned here seem to agree that at the close of Camus' story, the hero receives a sort of illumination, or revelation, or heightened awareness of his alienation from society, which he ignored before. First accused, then imprisoned, and finally condemned to death, Meursault supposedly *learns*—as the wheels of justice turn—the absurdity of the human condition.

There are several indications which, I believe, show that Meursault, from the moment we encounter him at the beginning of the story, is in possession of the same "truths" which Sartre, Storzer, Manly, and Smith contend come to him only at the story's end. I will attempt to show that if Meursault experiences any new-found awareness of the absurdity of the human predicament, he does so at a time prior to the death of his mother; that it is society, and not the hero himself, whose awareness grows in the course of the story. Finally, since Meursault will be viewed here as a lucid, rather than semiconscious, individual, and his alienated life-style as the outward manifestation of his state of consciousness, I feel compelled to reconsider the reasons for the hero's apparent willingness, at the story's end, to die.

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There is ample evidence to sustain the assertion that if an illumination takes place in the life of Meursault, it occurs, not as he approaches death, but before we ever encounter him, in his youth. I do not believe, as do Thomas Hanna and William M. Manly, that *L'Etranger* was meant to illustrate the human metamorphosis described by Camus in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe.*[6] Camus himself denied any intent to transform his protagonist into a hero in the final chapter of *L'Etranger*: "Il n'y a pas de rupture dans mon personnage. Dans ce chapître comme dans tout le reste du livre, il se borne à *répondre aux questions.*"[7] Meursault's antagonists are obviously convinced—to the contrary—that he is a sort of *déraciné* whose actions betray total disregard for the values of society. Although Camus traces, in the *Mythe*, the evolution of an "homme quotidien" into an "homme absurde," a careful reading of the entire passage in question should convince the reader that the hero of *L'Etranger* consistently represents the attitude of "l'homme absurde" and not that of the "homme quotidien":

> Avant de rencontrer l'absurde, l'homme quotidien vit avec ses buts, un souci d'avenir ou de justification (à l'égard de qui ou de quoi, ce n'est pas la question). Il évalue ses chances, il compte sur le plus tard, sur sa retraite ou le travail de ses fils. Il croit encore que quelque chose dans sa vie peut se diriger. Au vrai, il s'agit comme s'il était libre, même si tous les faits se chargent de contredire cette liberté. Après l'absurde, tout se trouve ébranlé. Cette idée que "je suis", ma façon d'agir comme si tout a un sens (même si, à l'occasion, je disais que rien n'en a), tout cela se trouve démenti d'une façon vertigineuse par l'absurdité d'une mort possible. Penser au lendemain, se fixer un but, avoir des préférences, tout cela suppose la croyance à la liberté, même si l'on s'assure parfois de ne pas la ressentir. Mais à ce moment, cette liberté supérieure, cette liberté d'*être* qui seule peut fonder une vérité, je sais bien alors qu'elle n'est pas. La mort est là comme seule réalité.[8]

Indeed, many of Meursault's actions seem deliberately aimless or unintentional to his accusers. But although he is not goal-oriented, it is only due to his belief that the actions of others are "sans importance réelle," an expression he uses quite frequently to justify his own alienation. Confronted with the issue of whether it would be acceptable to smoke in the presence of his deceased mother, Meursault finds that "cela n'avait aucune importance" (*E* 1129). When Marie Cardona is surprised at his invitation to take her to the movies on the day following his mother's burial, Meursault muses that "cela ne signifiait rien" (*E* 1137). He notes, after passing a lonely Sunday sitting at his balcony, that his mother's death has not affected his life: "Il n'y avait rien de changé" (*E* 1140). When Raymond asks him if he wants to be his friend, Meursault tells him that "ça m'était égal" (*E* 1144, 1146). To Marie's question as to whether he loves her or not, Meursault responds that "cela ne voulait rien dire" (*E* 1149), that love, or the social notion of love itself "ne signifiait rien," and that marriage "n'avait aucune importance" (*E* 1154). "Cela m'était égal," he says, to serve as a witness at Raymond's convocation (*E* 1150). Finally, abandoning his

job at Algiers for a new opening in Paris does not particularly appeal to him: "Dans le fond," Meursault observes, "cela m'était égal" (*E* 1153), simply because he had decided, earlier in life, that all these things were "sans importance réelle" (*E* 1154).

Even as Meursault places little importance on the ritualistic, goal-oriented conventions of society, such as mourning, marriage, and religion, his own actions are viewed by that society as futile. It will be remembered, however, that according to Camus, the most heroic image of man was the legendary Sisyphus, whose energies were totally given to fulfilling an eternal, futile task. In *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, Camus refers to the condemned hero as "le travailleur inutile des enfers," and implies that "il n'est pas de punition plus terrible que le travail inutile et sans espoir."[9] His Sisyphus is confined to Hades, where "tout l'être s'emploie à ne rien achever,"[10] yet Camus maintains that we must envision Sisyphus as happy.[11] Such happiness, according to Camus, consists of simple moments of reprieve: Sisyphus is compelled by the gods to a futile, eternal task. He must perpetually attempt to roll an enormous stone up a precipitous mountain path, knowing that at some point his burden will escape his grasp and roll to its resting place below. But as he descends the mountain—erect and burdenless—Sisyphus consciously awakens to the bitter satisfaction of knowing and assuming the hopelessness of his situation. Camus writes that "les vérités écrasantes périssent d'être reconnues."[12] Thus Sisyphus is greater than his futile, absurd destiny because he is at once without hope *and* happy. Like the blinded Oedipus, Camus points out, Sisyphus becomes reintegrated into his absurd predicament: "'Je juge que tout est bien," dit Oedipe, et cette parole est sacrée. Elle retentit dans l'univers farouche et limitée de l'homme. Elle enseigne que tout n'est pas, n'a pas été épuisé. Elle chasse de ce monde un dieu qui y était entré avec l'insatisfaction et le goût des douleurs inutiles. Elle fait du destin une affaire d'homme, qui doit être réglée entre les hommes. Toute la joie silencieuse de Sisyphe est là. Son destin lui appartient."[13]

The heroism of Meursault is comparable to that of the reintegrated Sisyphus. Elsewhere in the *Mythe de Sisyphe* Camus speaks of "la seule dignité de l'homme" which, for him, consists of "la révolte tenace contre sa condition, la persévérance dans un effort tenu pour stérile."[14] This is, I believe, an apt description of the life-style of Meursault. Moreover, Camus himself admitted that the situation of Sisyphus is not much different from that of man living today who has become, of necessity, a creature of habit. "L'ouvrier d'aujourd'hui travaille, tous les jours de sa vie, aux mêmes tâches et ce destin n'est pas moins absurde."[15] Condemned to prison and to death for adhering to a way of life society deems futile, Meursault accepts the conditions of his confinement, even as Sisyphus accepted the burden of his rock. "J'ai souvent pensé alors que si l'on m'avait fait vivre dans un

tronc d'arbre sec, sans autre occupation que de regarder la fleur du ciel au-dessus de ma tête, je m'y serais peu à peu habitué. J'aurai attendu des passages d'oiseaux ou des rencontres de nuages comme j'attendais ici les curieuses cravates de mon avocat et comme, dans un autre monde, je patientais jusqu'au samedi pour étreindre le corps de Marie" (*E* 1178). That Meursault compares the routine of prison life with that of the working-man and further compares communion with nature through a prison window with the sensual fulfillment he experienced before his confinement only demonstrates more clearly the thesis that his state of mind does not change in the course of the story.

The uniformity of Meursault's attitude is again demonstrated in his interview with the prison chaplain. Meursault speaks of truths, being certain of life and of death, as opposed to the half-truths presented him by the priest: "Il avait l'air si certain, n'est-ce pas? Pourtant, aucune de ses certitudes ne valait un cheveu de femme. Il n'était même pas sûr d'être en vie puisqu'il vivait comme un mort. Moi, j'avais l'air d'avoir les mains vides. Mais j'étais sûr de moi, sûr de tout, plus sûr que lui, sûr de ma vie et de cette mort qui allait venir. Oui, je n'avais que cela. Mais du moins, je tenais cette vérité autant qu'elle me tenait. *J'avais eu raison, j'avais encore raison, j'avais toujours raison*" [italics added] (*E* 1208).

Meursault's confession that he had been right about his beliefs—a confession relating to a period clearly extraneous to his prison term—makes one think that he might have encountered the "truth" about life and death at an earlier moment of his life, and that his attitude towards society evolved at that time from that of the "homme quotidien" to that of the "homme absurde" referred to earlier. Meursault alludes to that moment, I believe, when rejecting his employer's offer of a promising new position in Paris: "Quand j'étais étudiant," he says, "j'avais beaucoup d'ambition de ce genre. Mais quand j'ai dû abandonner mes études, j'ai très vite compris que tout cela était sans importance réelle" (*E* 1154). Abandoning the values of his peers, Meursault forged a way of life for himself more suited to his subjective taste.

Because his values were essentially subjective and because he tolerated those of society, Meursault initially escaped the criticism of his fellowmen. They, however, did not consistently exercise the same tolerance towards him. Hence it can be said that it is the attitude of society that changes in *L'Etranger*, and not that of the hero himself. For while Meursault is detached from certain social conventions, he nonetheless respects the right of others to practice them; thus he allows the Director of the home for the aged to give his atheistic mother a Christian burial, agrees to wed Marie Cardona although he sees nothing significant in the marriage rites, and seems concerned with doing his work well, in spite of the fact that he visibly lacks ambition. Although he lives outside many of the accepted

customs of society, Meursault and society are on good terms—at least until he sees his individualistic behavior being used against him by society as circumstantial evidence at his own trial.

The attitude of society is indeed curious, for Meursault's antagonists are manifestly far less concerned with the murder of the Arab than with his reactions to the events surrounding the death of his mother. Unsatisfied with the explanation of Meursault's feelings with regard to the death and burial of his mother, the defense attorney tells him, "Ceci n'est pas assez" (*E* 1170). When Meursault refuses to "majorer ses sentiments," as Camus calls it,[16] his attorney, angered, stalks out, and, when his services are needed again, is conspicuously absent "par suite de contretemps" (*E* 1171). Because Meursault refuses to lie in order to build a case for the defense, those whose duty it is to defend him are alienated from him.

While Meursault's accusers become increasingly hostile towards him, he maintains his position, even during the interrogation conducted by the examining Magistrate. He has been described by the prosecution as non-communicative and somewhat detached from those about him, which he does not deny (*E* 1171). His examiner goes on to assure him that he really wants to understand him: "Ce qui m'intéresse, c'est vous" (*E* 1171). But after hearing Meursault's version of the murder the Magistrate qualifies his interest, and undertakes to speak of the accused man as a repentant Christian. Meursault's interrogator asks disjointed questions, "toujours sans logique apparente" (*E* 1172), and Meursault refuses to be illogical if he can help it. When the Magistrate brandishes the crucifix in the accused's face, when he attempts to impose upon him the belief that *all* men believe in God, he has obviously become intolerant of the interrogated man's right to choose his own beliefs. Because Meursault refuses to lie to the Magistrate, another negative adjective is added to the dossier of the prosecution: "Ame . . . endurcie" (*E* 1173).

Meursault feels his antagonists—and even those who pretend to be favorable to his interests—attempting to deprive him of identity in the course of the trial. "J'étais parfois tenté d'intervenir et mon avocat me disait alors: 'Taisez-vous, cela vaut mieux pour votre affaire.' En quelque sorte, on avait l'air de traiter cette affaire en dehors de moi. Tout se déroulait sans mon intervention. Mon sort se réglait sans qu'on prenne mon avis" (*E* 1193). Meursault is particularly upset by the fury of the prosecuting attorney who testifies that he has no soul, "rien d'humain," and that not one moral principle which guided the lives of others influenced him (*E* 1194–1195). The prosecution asks for Meursault's death because he was essentially asocial, because he has neglected the conventions of society, and because he displayed no feelings or emotions (*E* 1196). Even when his attorney addresses the jury, Meursault feels excluded from the trial, especially since his attorney speaks in the first person, taking the part of his client: "Moi,"

says Meursault, "j'ai pensé que c'était m'écarter encore de l'affaire, me réduire à zéro, se substituer à moi" (*E* 1196–1197).

Camus voiced his distrust of intolerance towards nonconformity when he said: "Dans notre société, tout homme qui ne pleure pas à l'enterrement de sa mère risque d'être condamné à mort." [17] The individualistic attitude of Camus' hero, revealed in the course of the trial, is clearly seen as a threat to social convention. Society then reacts to this supposed threat and attempts to eliminate it.

I cannot but see this as proof that Meursault's unconventional behavior—brought to light during the trial—actually triggered the infernal social machine which was bound to condemn him in order to save itself. Thus it is society, not the hero, that has become aware of the absurd gap between subjectivity and conformity; while Meursault knowingly estranged himself from certain of society's conventions in his youth, nevertheless he respected the practices of others. They, in turn, find his estrangement criminal and summon him to conform or, as Meursault has expressed it, to reduce himself to zero. Fundamentally, it is Meursault's subjectivity which is under attack; but it is precisely his subjectivity which he will not abandon. So either Meursault must lose his identity by fusing with the social conventions he has cogently rejected or he must retain his identity through death. This is the absurd choice confronting Camus' hero, a choice thrust upon him by a change in society's attitude towards him.

In order to preserve his own integrity, Meursault chooses to die. Thus the name Camus has chosen for his hero has special meaning: Meursault means "leap into death" or "death-leap" and corresponds in many respects to the Kierkegaardian concept of the "leap of faith." Even as Kierkegaard's absurd hero, Abraham,[18] bypassed the considerations of logic and of ethics in order to remain true to his subjective conviction that God had indeed commanded him to take the life of his son, Isaac, so Meursault bypasses the laws of society when they condemn his unethical, because unconventional, attitudes. Both heroes can survive in society as long as society allows them to remain silent. For had Abraham attempted to explain his predicament, he would have been tried as a madman; once Meursault has been forced to speak, then it is clear that society must eliminate him as a threat to both ethics and reason. Søren Kierkegaard's "Knight of Faith," Abraham, has learned to "transform the leap of life into a walk, absolutely to express the sublime in the pedestrian." [19] His greatness consists of the fact that he is silent and suffers the anguish of the absurd paradox God has placed before him without speaking. When Abraham raised the knife above the pounding breast of his son to fulfill God's insane request, he had forsaken the wisdom and the ethics of man for his own subjectivity and had made what Kierkegaard calls the "leap of faith." Similarly, when Meursault is forced to speak, to reveal himself to society, it is discovered that he lives

in opposition to convention, and that he does not reason as the world reasons. As Abraham accepted the burden of thought sent to him from God, and as Sisyphus relentlessly assumed the burden of his stone, Camus' Meursault prepares himself to accept the unavoidable consequences of his choice to live in harmony with his own unconventional values: "Je m'ouvrais, pour la première fois à la tendre indifférence du monde" (*E* 1209). Meursault then recognizes his enemies, those who would attempt to reduce him to zero, and he anticipates seeing their faces as they surround the guillotine, hoping that they will greet him "avec des cris de haine" (*E* 1210).

The angry cries of hatred he expects to hear at his execution represent, for Meursault, the ultimate juxtaposition of his own subjective values and society's demand for conformity. His voluntary leap of death is not, as C. Roland Wagner has asserted, an escape from the "gray twilight of the life of the absurd."[20] It is rather an active and final confirmation of the negative truth of absurdity—discovered in his youth, adhered to during his lifetime, and his only consolation in death. As Herbert S. Gershman has suggested, Meursault's death represented for Camus "the leap (saut) from the contingent to the absolute."[21] And as Camus has indicated, the only absolute, for him, is the absurd.[22]

NOTES

1. Albert Camus, *L'Etranger*, in *Théâtre, Récits, Nouvelles*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1962); subsequent references are made to this edition and will appear in the text as *E*, followed by page numbers.

2. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Explication de *L'Etranger*," *Situations* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), I, p. 109.

3. Gerald H. Storzer, "La genèse du héros de *L'Etranger*," *French Review*, XXXVII (April 1964), 552.

4. William M. Manly, "Journey to Consciousness: The Symbolic Pattern of Camus' *L'Etranger*," *P.M.L.A.*, LXXIX (June 1964), 321-328.

5. Albert B. Smith, "Restriction and Consciousness in Camus' *L'Etranger*," *Studies in Short Fiction*, III (Summer 1966), 453.

6. Thomas Hanna, *The Thought and Art of Albert Camus* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1958), p. 51, and William M. Manly, "Journey to Consciousness: The Symbolic Pattern of Camus' *L'Etranger*," *P.M.L.A.*, LXXIX (June 1964), 323, view *L'Etranger* as an illustration of the evolution of Camus' hero from an "homme quotidien" into an "homme absurde."

7. Albert Camus, *Carnets* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), II (mars 1942), pp. 29-30.

8. Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, in *Essais*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), p. 140.

9. Ibid., p. 195.

10. Ibid., p. 196.

11. Ibid., p. 198.

12. Ibid., p. 197.

13. Ibid., p. 197.

14. Ibid., p. 191.

15. Ibid., p. 196.

16. Albert Camus, "Avant-propos," *L'Etranger*, ed. Germaine Brée and Carlos Lynes, Jr. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955), vii. Camus' "Avant-propos" is dated 8 January 1955; referred to hereafter as "Avant-propos."

17. "Avant-propos," vii.

18. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Doubleday and Company, Anchor Books, 1954). It is in discussing the Biblical story of Abraham, in attempting to understand Abraham's predicament, that Kierkegaard discovers in Abraham an absurd hero.

19. Ibid., p. 52.

20. C. Roland Wagner, "The Silence of *The Stranger*," *Modern Fiction Studies*, XVI (Spring 1970), 39.

21. Herbert S. Gershman, "On *L'Etranger*," *French Review*, XXIX (February 1956), 303.

22. *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, p. 121.